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Knowing where we're going makes the trip easier

By Brian Armstrong
MY VIEW

Having read the recent views of Gerald Ensley ("Dreaming too big," July 8) and Randy Hanna ("Let city's dreams soar." July 15) regarding prudent growth strategies for Tallahassee, I wonder whether Tallahassee's best answer for the future doesn't lie somewhere in between their respective opinions. Mr. Ensley speaks of improving Tallahassee in "baby steps." A review of the events over the last 25 years or so (since Coach Bobby Bowden arrived on the scene) described by Mr. Hanna in his rebuttal to Mr. Ensley reveals that Tallahassee has indeed taken baby steps over an extended period of time, which have made our city the wonderful place it is today to live, work and raise a family.

As Mr. Ensley suggests, Tallahassee must be realistic. But we can be realistic while dreaming about being the best that we can be.

As Mr. Hanna suggests, perhaps there are lessons to be learned by understanding the experiences of other cities with similar demographics to our city. But what good is such knowledge if Tallahassee has not first envisioned the ideal Tallahassee of 20 or 30 years into the future?

The identification of this "ideal" Tallahassee appears to be what is missing from the debates about how our city should meet the challenges of growth and business prosperity, while maintaining the high quality of life that we now have available to us. Before city leaders end up touring a city in every state, it would seem wise to first form a comprehensive picture of the ideal Tallahassee of 2040, and then identify cities that approximate that ideal to learn how they went about achieving it.

As president of the Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce and a leader of one of Tallahassee's prestigious law firms, Mr. Hanna knows that, in order to succeed, a business first must identify what the ideal business in its field would look like in 20 or 30 years?

After creating this vision, a business gets buy-in from its management and employees. But the most important step is to confirm that customers would want what the business is selling under its new vision. Only after each of these actions is taken can the business start to identify the steps necessary to achieve the vision.

The successful business will be the one that then establishes the one-, five-, 10- and 20-year goals that, when achieved, will best assist the company in achieving its ideal. This vision and

planning process are the critical areas where I believe that government should act like a business. It also is the area where Tallahassee appears to have come up short time and again.

The recent efforts of the Knight Creative Community Initiative certainly appear worthwhile, and such efforts are to be encouraged and applauded. But it is not clear that a vision of the ideal Tallahassee of 2040 has been established, and certainly not with the buy-in of all Tallahasseeans.

If the recent visit to Chattanooga by notable Tallahasseeans was intended to dovetail with the efforts of the KCCI group, the news coverage of these two undertakings has not been made clear how this would happen. If these efforts are not being coordinated, why not?

The KCCI group has identified four areas for exploration and identification of changes that the group has suggested would improve Tallahassee. But if all of us put our efforts into such changes, would achieving them move Tallahassee closer to the Ideal Tallahassee that we as its residents desire? If the visitors to Chattanooga identify things they saw in that city that would improve Tallahassee if put in place here, would those things move Tallahassee closer to the Ideal Tallahassee?

The answer to both of these questions is: “Who knows?” That’s because we have not yet described the big-picture “Ideal” Tallahassee.

A business mantra of not long ago was “if it ain’t broke, break it.” I didn’t subscribe to that mantra for the business that I was in then, and I don’t think our city should live by it now. That’s why I believe that we are at risk of enduring painful, costly changes unless we first take the time to identify the vision of the Ideal Tallahassee of 2040. Maybe if we create such a vision, we will see that Mr. Ensley’s “baby steps” are absolutely consistent with Mr. Hanna’s “soaring” dreams.